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ABSTRACT

The appreciative inquiry process was used to identify conditions enhancing self-directed learning. Participants in the project did the following: (1) used the five-step process to identify factors/conditions/forces that seemed to cause self-directed learning to occur; (2) created a matrix by combining the factors/conditions/forces with six variables (purpose, structure, relationships, rewards, leadership, and helpful mechanisms); (3) identified for each cell statements of behaviors that their organizations had undertaken with positive outcomes for learning; (4) wrote a single statement of behavior for each cell that captured the essence of the multiple statements; and (5) consisted whether their organizations do and should do the behavior. The conditions identified were as follows: (1) continuous improvement adopted as an organizational strategy; (2) involving individuals by letting them know how their actions contribute to the organization's goals and that their input is valued; (3) rewards and support for individuals who take responsibility for their own learning; (4) values underlying the organization's structure and purpose that are in harmony with individuals' values; (5) managers who set an example by learning; (6) valuing differences; (7) support for risk-taking; (8) effective communication systems that include a network of all stakeholders, flexible supportive structures and processes, and a supportive culture; (9) fostering collaboration in work and play; (10) encouraging learning by implementing rewards and processes that support creativity and innovation. (CML)

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CONDITIONS ENHANCING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

A Report to the Participants

Faculty of Continuing Education

The University of Calgary

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July 20, 1992

This project was undertaken in cooperation with Ashrod (Calgary Chapter). It was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through the "Group for Interdisciplinary Research on Autonomy and Training" (GIRAT) which is based at Université dé Montréal. Principle researcher for GIRAT is Nicole Tremblay of Université dé Montréal. Co-researchers are Roland Foucher of Université de Québéc, Alain Goselin of Université dé Montréal, and H.K. Morris Baskett of The University of Calgary.

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REPORT TO THE PARTICIPANTS

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

A. BACKGROUND

Today, most organizations are becoming aware that in order to survive and flourish, the organization, as well as those in the organization, must learn effectively.

Most of us have assumed that learning occurs only under circumstances of formal education, such as when staff are trained for new skills or new procedures, or when they participate in arranged courses and seminars.

Over the past few years, we have come to realize that the largest amount of learning in organizations occurs informally and incidentally-through interaction with supervisors, colleagues and customers; as part of accomplishing a work project; by participating in committees and teams. In effect, while 'formal' learning is the tip of the iceberg, the largest portion of learning is below the surface and not well recognized or understood.

This realization has coincided with the trend in workplaces to drive the responsibility and power down to where it can be most effective- usually at the front line. The elimination of layers of supervisors has meant that workers must be more in charge of their own development, learning, and decisions. This merging of self-directedness in the workplace and learning has become an important and powerful element in organization development.

The "Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace" project in which you participated was designed to help us more fully understand workplace learning. As part of a larger study undertaken by the Group for Interdisciplinary Research on Autonomy and Training (GIRAT), the goal of this project was to identify conditions which facilitate self-directed learning in the workplace. Because those involved in designing the Calgary project wanted to ensure that the research was as useful to the Human Resource community as possible, a "Participatory Action Research" approach was used.

B. ORGANIZATION OF THE PROJECT

As participants in the inquiry you have experienced part of this project and have been informed about other parts. For this reason, this report will not go into great detail. Some review is necessary for those who may have missed a meeting.

One of the objectives of this research project has been to work with practitioners and organizations to produce results and outcomes beneficial to all stakeholders.

There were three types of players in this project. The researcher, facilitator, and administrative roles were filled by Morris Baskett and Jan Dixon. Steering committee members provided industry and practitioner input. Participants shared their own learning and working experiences. For a mailing list see Appendix A.

In order to make the project responsive to feedback at each stage the project model alternated steering committee meetings with participant meetings. After each participant meeting, the steering committee met to discuss how the next session could be improved as a result of what we had learned thus far.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

The appreciative inquiry process used in the research was suggested by the steering committee. The process is participative, allows evolution of the content, encourages action, and focuses on things that have worked well. These characteristics were well suited to the objectives of the research project.

The steering committee sought the advice of Dana Roman of TransAlta Utilities on how to run the inquiry sessions. Dana had extensive experience with the process in his organization and had the benefit of working with Tom Pitman and Gervase Bushe who have developed a consulting practice around the appreciative inquiry process.

1. Appreciative Inquiry Process (AI)

In this project, AI was both a research data gathering tool and a process management tool. The AI model helped to design and structure process for the enquiry sessions along the lines of our objectives. In the course of completing each step, data was generated for the research project.

AI is a five step process (see Appendix B) which highlights participants' peak experiences and provides a process for turning this information into vision-like statements and action plans for their organizations.

2. Appreciative Inquiry: The Content

We sorted data generated from peak learning experiences into factors/conditions/forces which make peak learning possible. Sometimes these forces seemed to "cause" the learning to occur (eg. learning from others) and other times it was enabling conditions that made the difference (eg. having freedom). By drawing from actual learning experiences we were able to identify some critical components necessary for learning (life-giving forces). One question that begs to be answered is how much overlap there would be between this list and ones generated by other groups.

Armed with this list of forces, we needed a systematic and thorough method for finding out if organizations were providing the conditions and factors for learning. In order to do this analysis, we created a matrix by combining the life-giving forces and Weisbord's 6-Box (1976) organizational model which describes six variables: purpose, structure, relationships, rewards, leadership, helpful mechanisms. In this way we were able to examine, cell-by-cell, how different aspects of the organization interacted with each life-giving force. This matrix was handed out at the final inquiry session.

As they looked at each cell participants were asked to think of times when the aspect of the organization functioned particularly well in providing the life-giving force. We asked what the organization was doing to create that situation. The data generated from this phase was a series of statements in each cell which described behaviors/actions that the organization had undertaken with positive outcomes for learning.

A committee drawn from the participants generated provocative propositions from the statements in each cell. These statements tried to capture the essence in each cell; to bring the ideas together in a more readable and understandable form.

We then asked participants to validate the statements by answering two questions: (1)" How well does the statement describe your organization?" and (2) "Do you think this statement is something your organization should strive for?" These two questions were designed to highlight the difference between the reality and the ideal. This data is included with this report. Some statistics were done to determine if the difference between questions was significant. Only proposition number 3 produced a significant difference.

D. RESULTS

Two types of results were generated by this project
(1) enhancers of SDL and (2) validation data. Each is discussed separately below.

1. How Organizations Enhance Self-Directed Learning

In terms of the research project we could have stopped the process at the point where the propositions were generated. A content analysis of the provocative propositions produced a list of enhancers of self-directed learning as identified by the participants. The propositions were created from statements about the actions that organizations take which create environments in which employees are enabled and motivated to learn. Therefore, looking for themes amongst the provocative propositions does reveal what the organization can do to enhance SDL.

The enhancers identified apply to more than self-directed learning in organizations. Many of these characteristics are also cited as factors in learning organizations and in *good* management practices.

Continuous Improvement (Propositions: 2, 6, 10, 26, 38)

Self directed learning is enhanced when continuous improvement is adopted as an organizational strategy. Participants reported optimal learning conditions when the organization uses feedback and reflection to evolve beyond traditional boundaries. Employees benefited when they were encouraged in personal continuous improvement.

Involving Individuals (Propositions: 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 15, 17, 25, 29, 32, 40)

Employees learn best when they are informed of and able to contribute to the larger organizational picture. They need to know how their actions contribute to the organization's goals and that their input is valued.

Taking Personal Responsibility (Propositions: 26, 29, 36, 41)

The organization can be a context which stimulates learning. Learning occurs within the individual. Learning is maximized when the individual takes control of and responsibility for his/her learning. Individuals are encouraged to take this responsibility when the organization rewards and supports personal learning initiatives.

Harmonious Values (Propositions: 4, 12)

Participants reported enhanced learning when the values underlying the organization's structure and purpose were in harmony with the individual's values.

Leadership Setting an Example (Propositions: 30, 33)

Learning by example is a powerful process. Managers and supervisors have an impact on everyone in the organization. Learning was enhanced by leadership which set an example.

Valuing Differences (Propositions: 14, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 28, 35)

Valuing differences enhances learning by providing acceptance, trust, and mutual respect. Under these conditions employees can feel uninhibited about offering Xadifferent perspective or solution. Also motivating, were rewards which reflected individual differences.

Communication (Propositions: 9, 12, 13, 15, 20, 40, 42)

Effective communication systems are necessary for learning to occur. Current and relevant information promotes learning and appropriate performance. Three aspects of communication were highlighted by the participants: (a) a broad network including all organizational stakeholders, (b) flexible, supportive structures and processes, and (c) a supportive culture.

Taking Risks (Propositions: 7, 20, 25, 27, 31, 32, 33, 39, 41, 42)

Organizations which support risk-taking provide a good environment for learning. Support means leadership, systems, and processes encourage exploring, creating, experimenting, and applying new ideas.

Teamwork (Propositions: 12, 17, 19, 30, 37)

Teamwork enhances learning by providing opportunities to take on larger challenges, learn from others, and see relationships between different aspects of the organization's work. The organization can enhance learning by fostering collaboration in work and play.

Innovation (Propositions: 24, 34, 39, 42)

Enabling employees to innovate stimulates learning. Organizations can encourage learning by implementing rewards and processes which support creativity and innovation.

2. Validating the Propositions

Some of the participants stated an interest in the appreciative inquiry process. For this reason, the final steps were carried out to give participants a sense of what the entire process was capable of accomplishing. The validation and action planning steps would be appropriate when applying the process in an organization. Participants found the exercises interesting and informative. The validation data accompanies this report.

E. APPLICATION

This project has produced several possibilities for supporting organization development. You may wish to consider applying this to your own situation.

The steering committee met after Session III and generated some suggestions about how to use the data, processes and experiences.

1. Using the Data

a. Enhancers of SDL

Use the enhancers by having staff review the ones stated here, considering how they apply to your organization, and selecting those which you think need attention. The enhancers provide a kind of launching point for discussion of one's own organizational situation.

b. Provocative Propositions

The provocative propositions may provide a springboard for discussion. Members of your organization could review each proposition and reflect upon their own experience and the organizational environment. Remember that the propositions grew out of experiences from a number of organizations; we caution you against assuming that they relate directly to your organization.

2. Using the Process

You could repeat the appreciative inquiry process from beginning to end as we did in the three sessions. We recommend that you get some help in understanding and using the AI process. It takes considerable experience to get it working right. Two possible approaches could be taken:

a. Self-directed learning could be explored within your own organization. If you take this route, tell us about your results so that we can contrast them with the project results.

b. Use the AI process to investigate some other issue such as visioning, strategic planning, or any other situation where you are seeking a motivating concensus.

3. Using the Material

Yes, by all means use the material produced throughout the project. This material was generated collectively, and thus belongs to the practice community. When using the material, please ensure the following:

a. You acknowledge its source:" The Self-Directed Learning in the Workplace Calgary Project supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, undertaken by GIRAT and the Faculty of Continuing Education, The University of Calgary, in cooperation with ASHROD(Calgary Chapter)".

b. You make it clear that the Provocative Propositions are only representative of the group which met to generate them and may not be directly applicable to other groups. Nonetheless, you can use them as a springboard to intervention.

c. You are invited to work with the researchers in generating additional data which can be used to elevate HRD practice generally. For example, if you are going to use the Provocative Propositions and the scale, talk to us first, so that we can help you prepare it in such a way that we both can benefit from the resultant data and experiences.

F. NEXT STEPS FOR THE PROJECT

A meeting of GIRAT will be held in mid-August. At that meeting Morris will be presenting an expanded version of this report along with some suggestions for further study. His suggestions will include:

- repeating the study in specific organizations
- doing on-site observations and individual interviews
- developing an inventory or checklist for organizations wanting to assess their SDL potential

G. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This final report is the result of the efforts and interest of many individuals and organizations. It also represents a milestone in collaboration amongst human and organization development practitioners and researchers in Calgary.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions made to this study by members of the Steering Committee and the many participants who helped at specific stages in the project's development and completion. (See Appendix A)

Appendix B

FIVE STEPS OF THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PROCESS

1. Naming the Life-Giving Forces

   The objective was to identify the key factors involved in SDL. Participants broke into trios to interview each other about peak learning experiences. Notes were made about those factors or conditions which made it a peak experience. Everyone's notes were placed on the wall and an affinity charting process was used to sort the factors/conditions into categories which represent the life-giving forces for learning. Names were chosen for each category.

2. Stalking the Light

   This step is a cascading network of interviews that results in everyone in the organization (or department) having the chance to tell their stories about the Life-Giving Forces. This is a mutual inquiry process between the interviewer and interviewee. This step helps to build buy-in and commitment to the change effort.

   (This step was not done in our design)

3. Working the Walls Together

   This step involved creating and examining each cell of a matrix created by combining the Life-Giving Forces and an organizational model. Specific individual information was collected for each cell. This information highlighted how the organization(s) supported or encouraged SDL.

4. Remembering Our Future

   Using the experiences related in Working the Walls Together, participants collectively developed and validated a statement for each cell of the matrix. The statements are called Provocative Propositions and captured the aspirations of the organization based upon the peak experiences of its employees.

5. Amplifying Our Vitality

   In this step, the Provocative Propositions were transformed into action steps.
   (This step was modified in our design)

Appendix C

Reading list

Candy, Phillip C. (1991). Self Direction for Lifelong Learning. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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